

Pressure is mounting on single parents to find work and move off benefits – but the government’s reforms will do very little to help

Rigid adherence to the conditions of jobseeker’s allowance inhibits, rather than enables, a single parent’s ability to find better paid employment, writes [Phillippa Newis](#). Government would do better to be patient with single parents who wish to complete further education courses instead of forcing them to rely on unsustainable, poorly paid employment.



One of the first provisions of the government’s flagship Welfare Reform Act 2012 came into force last week. From 21 May, single parents whose youngest child is five are no longer entitled to receive income support (IS). Instead, they will need to claim jobseeker’s allowance (JSA) or another benefit. This is the latest in a steady stream of welfare-to-work initiatives targeted at single parents over the last 14 years.

Single parents on JSA will get the same amount of money as they did on IS but will have to show that they are actively looking for work in order to receive their fortnightly payment. But will increased benefit conditionality have the desired effect? Will we see substantially greater numbers of single parents with younger children finding and keeping a job?

An unbalancing act

124,000 single parents will be affected by the shake-up initially, but according to government estimates only one in five of this group will enter employment. [A new report by Gingerbread](#) throws a harsh light on the realities facing single parents with younger children who must now find work amid a backdrop of high unemployment and economic decline.

New data shows 68 per cent of single parents enter employment in one of the three lowest paid occupational groups. Over a quarter enter jobs that require little or no training; a further fifth enter sales and customer service posts and 22 per cent take roles in personal service occupations. Finding a job is not the only obstacle facing single parents. Securing sustainable employment is also a significant challenge. For those who succeed in finding work that fits with their caring responsibilities, a substantial minority (20 per cent) will move out of employment again within 12 months. Low paid work is often insecure, characterised by short-term contracts and irregular hours.

A stitch in time: the benefits of skilling up

The vast majority of single parents want to earn their own money and get off unemployment benefits. But it is rarely as easy as taking the first job that comes along. For single parents with young children who have been away from the labour market for some time, access to further education provides an important stepping stone back into work. Gaining a level 3 qualification makes a significant difference to the amount of money a single parent can earn. For example, 55 per cent of people aged 25-29 with a level 1 qualification are earning less than £7 per hour in comparison with only 25 per cent who hold a level 3 qualification.

Single parents on JSA can receive a fee remission from Jobcentre Plus for their first level 3 course. However, they have to be prepared to give up their course if offered employment or face a payment sanction if they refuse – a complete waste of public money, not only in respect to loss of fees but also in light of future potential for earnings. A better paid job can reduce reliance on in-work benefit payments and is a step towards single parents being able to move off benefits altogether in the long term.

Both a worker and a parent – the need for family-friendly jobs

Single parents want to take advantage of economic and social benefits of working; 57 per cent of all single parents work and 54 per cent of single parents with five and six year olds are already in paid employment. But the fact is that they need jobs that enable them to be both a worker and a parent. Part-time work is very important for single parents, and particularly for single parents of younger children. 75 per cent of single parents in work with children under six have a part-time job. Suitable job opportunities, and in particular short-hours jobs (those of less than 16 hours a week), remain sparse.

Single parents with five and six year olds tell us that it is not just the number of hours that is important when looking for work – the location of a job, being able to work during school hours and a commitment to flexible working by an employer all contribute towards making paid work a realistic option for single parents with younger children. However, there is little evidence to suggest that policies for labour market growth and employer practices are keeping pace with welfare-to-work reforms.

Single parents are facing an uphill to find family-friendly jobs:

“You think that I had loads going for me, but I can’t get a job for love or money. I’ve been looking for a couple of years. At the end of day it is an employer’s market at the moment. They are laughing! These people have so many applicants. A recent one I can tell you about is there is a new freezer centre being built, it is not even built yet and I applied online for a part-time opportunity and I just got the email back yesterday that it has been filled. I’m like how has that happening? The shop is not even built yet.” (Single parent on income support)

Changing the ‘work-first’ culture

Over the last four years changes to entitlement to income support have resulted in increasing numbers of single parents claiming JSA. Support was pledged to help with the transition into work, including the reform of tax credits, increased provision of childcare and better flexible working policies. Much of this promised support remains a work in progress and the reduction of financial help towards childcare costs via working tax credits is a regressive step.

Rigid adherence to the conditions of JSA inhibits, rather than enables, a single parent’s ability to find better paid employment. Ensuring that single parents can complete a further education course is a worthwhile investment; it requires a modicum of patience on the part of the government and a little bit of well-placed faith in the determination of single parents to work themselves and their children out of poverty.

The full Gingerbread report is [available online](#).

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About the author

Phillippa Newis is a policy officer at Gingerbread, a charity for single parent families. She has campaigned for a fair benefits system for single parent families and access to education and work for single parents who desire it.

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3. [The government’s benefits cuts mean that families are finding it even harder to make ends meet](#)

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